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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 COLOMBO 000684

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STATE FOR SA/INS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: THE JAFFNA BLUES: NORTHERN TAMILS FEAR COLOMBO
COMPLACENCY WITH CEASEFIRE STATUS QUO

REF: A. COLOMBO 635

[B](#). COLOMBO 559

[C](#). COLOMBO 458

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) During a March 30-April 1 trip to the northern districts of Jaffna and Vavuniya, poloff and POL FSN met with local government officials, members of the judiciary, aid workers, human rights activists, Members of Parliament, university faculty and students, religious figures, members of the security forces, and a representative of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM). While living conditions have undoubtedly improved during the ceasefire, discussions with Tamil interlocutors, whose sympathies spanned the spectrum of pro- and anti-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) sentiment, revealed a uniform suspicion of Colombo's sincerity in pursuing a negotiated settlement to the conflict. In particular, many expressed fear that the Sinhalese-majority south regards the ceasefire as an adequate "settlement" and is uninterested in pursuing a more permanent resolution. Continued restrictions on fishing rights and access to former residential areas in High Security Zones imposed by the security forces were routinely cited as particular grievances. On the ground, local government representatives and the LTTE seem to have established an effective modus vivendi to facilitate the delivery of government services and tsunami aid. Whether valid or not, the overwhelming local perception of not-so-benign neglect from the center can be manipulated by the LTTE to stoke long-standing resentment of the GSL and to validate Tiger propaganda claims that the LTTE alone can ensure the welfare of the Tamil community. End summary.

THE VIEW ALONG THE A-9:
PEACE PROCESS STUCK AT CENTER

[1](#)2. (C) Poloff and POL FSN visited the northern districts of Jaffna and Vavuniya March 30-April 1, traveling by road along the A-9 highway (open since mid-2002). Tamil interlocutors, as well as INGO representatives, in government-controlled territory uniformly expressed consternation at the lack of movement on the peace process, with most faulting the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and President Chandrika Kumaratunga for the failure to move ahead. This view emerged clearly and repeatedly with contacts across the political spectrum, from full-blown Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) apologists, like Tamil National Alliance (TNA) Members of Parliament, to individuals opposed (albeit quietly) to LTTE policies. Many blame the President's preoccupation with other issues (e.g., pacifying her pro-Marxist coalition partner, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP); ensuring her political longevity via a controversial referendum; and, more recently, distributing tsunami relief).

[1](#)3. (C) Several contacts, including a political science professor at the University of Jaffna and a former local civil servant, attributed the slowdown in progress to a lack of interest in the Sinhalese-majority south in a long-term political resolution to the conflict. Instead, they speculated, the Sinhalese and their political leadership may view the ceasefire as a satisfactory "settlement" and have no intention of pursuing further negotiations. Even local government representatives, such as the Government Agent in Vavuniya and the Assistant Government Agent in Jaffna, voiced dismay at the slow pace of improvements promised after the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA), such as the provision of housing for persons internally displaced by the conflict. According to M.S. Shanmugam, Government Agent in Vavuniya, only 2 percent of the funding promised for housing by the World Bank and UNDP has come through for the internally displaced (IDPs) in his district, while not a single cent for housing reconstruction from the GSL has been received. At this rate, housing reconstruction for the conflict-displaced in Vavuniya will take 18 years to complete, he concluded dismally.

HIGH SECURITY ZONES:
HIGHLY RESENTED

14. (C) Although many interlocutors acknowledged that life has generally improved during the ceasefire, they also complained there have been no recent significant steps forward. Instead, some claimed that the GSL was gradually and quietly chipping away at local residents' rights by imposing restrictions not agreed to in the CFA. The GSL decision to exclude the High Security Zones (HSZs) from resettlement was one common irritant cited repeatedly in discussions. (Note: HSZs are areas deemed to be of special strategic or security importance by the Sri Lankan military. HSZs--much of which used to be residential areas before the conflict--are now occupied by the security forces. IDPs whose former homes lie within an HSZ have not been permitted to return. The TNA claims that about 30 percent of the land in Jaffna has been designated as HSZs; the actual total is significantly lower.) One such IDP, TNA MP Mavai Senathirajah, has filed a case with the Supreme Court protesting the HSZs as a violation of his fundamental rights. He said he plans to reject a GSL counter-offer of alternative land. (Note: Senathirajah did not mention, of course, that the LTTE has imposed its own version of High Security Zones in the territory it controls. In a separate meeting in Colombo, Human Rights Commissioner Radhika Coomaraswamy told poloff that the HSZ issue is a particularly tricky one for the Supreme Court since the establishment of HSZs can be legally justified only during a State of Emergency. If the Supreme Court were to rule in favor of the GSL and approve the HSZs, she reasoned, it would also have to recommend reinstituting a State of Emergency. She speculated that the Court will attempt to duck this politically unappealing scenario by dragging out the proceedings for as long as possible.)

15. (C) According to Major General Sunil Tennekoon, Commander of Security Forces Headquarters in Jaffna, restrictions on the HSZs are necessary to ensure force protection; those restrictions could be relaxed if the LTTE demonstrates an improved commitment to maintaining the CFA. He has already opened up a buffer zone on the periphery of some of the HSZs to cultivation, he noted, and is waiting to see how this pilot program proceeds (and whether LTTE violations of the CFA continue) before deciding on further adjustments. In a separate conversation in Ratnapura on April 6, however, Major General Susil Chandrapala, current Deputy Chief of Army Staff and Tennekoon's predecessor in Jaffna, sounded a more sympathetic note, indicating that he believed some of the IDPs' sense of grievance is justified. "A lot more could be done" to ameliorate the HSZ situation, he asserted, but personal political agendas and "vested interests among our own people" in the south had prevented his efforts to do so during his tenure.

16. (C) A number of interlocutors, including Senathirajah, fellow TNA MP M.K. Eelaventhan, Assistant Government Agent V. Verabadravillai, human rights lawyer M. Remadious and former Municipal Commissioner C.V.K. Sivagnanam, also cited the abridgement of fishing rights as another source of local dissatisfaction. (Security forces have placed a number of restrictions on fishing conditions, including distances from shore, hours and the kinds of boats that may be used.) The MPs, noting that fishing rights, like the HSZs, are not mentioned in the CFA, expressed concern that the GSL may be trying surreptitiously to re-introduce restrictions on local life aimed at bringing the north back to the status quo before the ceasefire--when the State of Emergency was still in effect.

DISAFFECTED YOUTH

17. (C) A group of Jaffna University students who met with poloff March 31 expressed deep-seated skepticism that the GSL--especially with the JVP as a partner--is serious about the peace process. Instead, they charged, President Kumaratunga is preoccupied with trying to change the electoral system and abolish the executive presidency--moves they believe would minimize minority representation in Parliament. Rather than viewing the JVP as the main obstacle to a peaceful resolution, the students blamed the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the United National Party, which have alternated control of the government over the past 20 years, for prolonging the conflict. Every time one seems ready to come to a settlement with the LTTE, the other party accuses it of selling out. Sri Lanka is not only administered by the GSL, they asserted; the LTTE administers part of it. The President should thus move ahead with constitutional changes recognizing that fact, they said. When asked if the LTTE could also show greater flexibility, the group replied that

the Tigers had already made significant concessions, e.g., revising the demand for a separate state; the ball was now in the GSL's court.

18. (C) Poloff asked the students how their lives would improve if the LTTE's proposal for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) were implemented. They quickly offered several responses: the Sri Lanka Army would go away; the HSZs would disappear; there would be freedom of movement (no more checkpoints) and "freedom of action"; and residents' "economic needs would be satisfied" because foreign aid for reconstruction would begin flowing more freely. (There seemed to be no expectation that private investment--and thus, perhaps, jobs for these soon-to-be graduates--would be forthcoming.) When asked whether the LTTE would allow "freedom of action" under the ISGA to political opponents, the students fell silent and eventually changed the subject. (Comment: Whatever their claims to "freedom of action" under the LTTE, the students' silence in response to this query suggested they do not believe they have freedom of speech. End comment.)

"JOINT MECHANISM":
JAFFNA'S JAUNDICED VIEW

19. (C) Many Tamil interlocutors blamed the GSL for continued delays in concluding a "joint mechanism" with the LTTE on tsunami aid (Ref A), viewing GSL hesitation as further proof

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of insincerity in the peace process. Despite the absence of a formal mechanism, aid workers and local government authorities cited ongoing close and effective cooperation on tsunami relief at the working level between local GSL

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representatives and the LTTE. The real value of agreement on a formal mechanism, most emphasized, would lie in the political message it signaled from the center. Jaffna Assistant Government Agent Verabadravillai, noting that most of the tsunami-affected families in his district are in LTTE-controlled territory, said that there "should be some way of interaction at the political level" between the two parties; at the working level, however, coordination is strong. C.V.K. Sivagnanam, Coordinator of the Jaffna Tsunami Task Force, stressed that communication and coordination on both sides are strong at the working level--but expressed quiet despair about prospects that the GSL would formally institutionalize those relations by signing on to the mechanism.

110. (C) In a separate meeting with INGO representatives, UNHCR Durable Solutions Officer Agraj Dragaj echoed this sentiment, commenting that agreement on a joint mechanism "would demonstrate political will to resolve the (ethnic) problem" at the central level. ICRC Head of Sub Delegation Fred Robarts agreed, describing agreement on a mechanism as "more of a political achievement at the central level" since local "coordination is (already) going ahead at a practical level." He added that the LTTE-affiliated Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO), which had initially tried to dominate relief activities, has "become gradually more consultative." The local CARITAS representative cited one possible practical benefit of the mechanism: quicker and more efficient clearance of relief items for the north. He added that over USD 140,000 in relief items for his organization have been held up in Colombo for an extended period, pending Customs clearance. (Note: This problem is not limited to aid items intended for the north. End note.)

CEASEFIRE: OKAY FOR NOW

111. (C) Despite the general sense of dissatisfaction with the lack of progress toward negotiations, few interlocutors foresaw an imminent break in the ceasefire. (Comment: The exception was the TNA, which routinely hints at a possible return to hostilities.) Vavuniya has been generally quiet, according to sources there, with no assassinations by the LTTE or rival groups within the past six months. A March 28 grenade attack on the LTTE office in Vavuniya, which injured three people, was an anomaly, according to District Court Judge M. Elancheliyan. He speculated that the EPRLF, a former anti-LTTE paramilitary group that he claims remains "a little close to the government" and has not been fully disarmed, was responsible. Most interlocutors in Jaffna regarded the civil disturbances there earlier in March (Ref C) as a blip and stressed that tensions had eased since then. Voitto Leinonen, Deputy Head of District for the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), said that the recent civil unrest was not related to the CFA. He described dialogue between the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) and the political wing of the LTTE as "good," adding that the two sides met monthly to iron out

differences. The two militaries have not met for two years, despite repeated requests from the SLA, he acknowledged.

112. (C) A political science professor at the University of Jaffna told us he believes that the LTTE's desire to preserve the international image--and, to some extent, the attention--it has cultivated during the ceasefire will deter the Tigers from returning to hostilities. Major General Tennekoon accused the LTTE of trying to capitalize on any incident to stoke further tensions. (Accidents involving military vehicles, unfortunately, provide a handy pretext. According to one interlocutor, there were four such incidents in March alone, one of them fatal.) Tennekoon discounted other interlocutors' assessment that the March protests were at least partially spontaneous; instead, he asserted, they were stage-managed entirely by the LTTE. Most disturbing, he said, was that the LTTE had used schoolchildren in the demonstrations. (Note: This is not an entirely new development. The LTTE used a similar tactic during the Point Pedro disturbances two years ago. End note.) Tennekoon said that he had protested the LTTE's manipulation of schoolchildren to the SLMM and UNICEF.

113. (C) Interlocutors offered several theories for what sparked the recent unrest. The LTTE was trying to provoke incidents between the military and civilians, Tennekoon suggested, because the Tigers "don't want us to get closer to the people." Despite Tiger attempts to undermine better civil-military relations, Tennekoon reported enthusiastic turnouts to the SLA's "hearts-and-minds" programs, i.e., sports events, medical clinics, blood drives, etc. He has begun a Tamil instruction program for some of his soldiers, but acknowledged that only a handful of SLA personnel currently in Jaffna can speak the local language. Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) in Jaffna K.D.L. Dalpatadu said the Tigers are "trying to set the stage for a popular uprising." He believes LTTE-agitated demonstrations are intended to "estimate the response from the security forces"; to improve the Tigers' intelligence collection capability; and to demoralize the security forces. The Tamil-speaking SSP acknowledged, however, that there are sometimes legitimate civilian grievances that the security forces must work quickly to address. For example, he reported, he had arrested two SLA soldiers and fired one of his own policemen who were accused of sexual assault. The ICRC's Robarts said that the military sees the protests as an attempt to "test" its soldiers. In general, he said, outbursts at the local level merely reflect the lack of good relations between the two sides "at the top." He added, however, that ICRC had advised the LTTE not to use schoolchildren in demonstrations and to keep the protests peaceful.

COMMENT

114. (C) Life has undoubtedly improved for residents of the north since the ceasefire, but the lack of progress toward the next difficult stage--resuming negotiations--for the past two years is creating a strong perception among the local community of disengagement--and disregard--in the capital. It is hard for visitors to Jaffna to overlook the stark sense of grievance among the local population, but President Kumaratunga (who has never been to Jaffna during her 10 years in office) may be in danger of doing just that. The President may be calculating that the international sympathy the GSL gained as a result of the tsunami has alleviated the pressure on her to re-engage with the LTTE. Local residents see it differently, however. To them, the tsunami's heavy toll on Tamil communities (five of the eight worst-affected districts are either under complete LTTE control or contain significant pockets of LTTE control/influence) should mean greater GSL attention to these areas--and thus a greater need to engage with the LTTE on some level. That the GSL continues to delay agreeing to a joint mechanism on tsunami relief--however legitimate the reasons for the delay may be (Ref A)--is viewed locally as just further evidence of Colombo's detachment and insincerity.